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ABSTRACT

This study tested the hypothesis that there is no significant difference in reading achievement among children in grades 2 through 5 related to family structure. Researchers administered the Stanford Achievement Test to 119 students in an Alabama city suburban school system. Of the sample, 69 children lived in intact families and 50 lived in either single parent or "blended" families. A blended family is defined as a child living with a stepfather or stepmother. In addition to the test, pupils completed a demographic data sheet. Analysis upholds the hypothesis in grades 2 through 4;; subjects in grade 5 who were in intact families, however, exhibited higher scores in reading achievement than did those from other family types. These findings suggest that students in grade 5 may experience preadolescent changes that affect achievement. Furthermore, a cumulative effect among poor readers could present itself by grade 5. Demographic data reveal more "latchkey" children from single parent and blended families in upper grades than in lower grades. Results indicate that teachers should not assume that students living in a family situation other than an intact structure will exhibit a difference in achievement scores. Two tables of data are appended. (CJH)

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FAMILY STATUS AND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

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Educator's have long been convinced that family background has an influence on school achievement. While many factors have been used to access this relationship--family income, social status, race, and parental, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship of children's achievement to the family structure.

In the past decade, the prototypical American family (i.e., a married couple with children) has undergone dramatic changes as many young adults choose to delay marriage and many more parents become divorced. According to a recent U.S. Census Bureau report, Household and Family Characteristics, married couples with children under 18 have declined both in number and as a percentage of all family households -- from 25.8 million (50 percent) in 1970 to 24.5 million (39 percent) in 1985. Additionally, the number of single parents with children more than doubled from 3.8 million (7 percent) in 1970 to 8.9 million (14 percent) in 1985. Further emphasize is placed on the fact that children growing up in a home with two parents will no longer be considered a universal practice. The projection is that by 1990 only 69 percent of children will be raised by both parents (Glick, 1984).

Even more impressive than these statistics is the rate at which mothers are joining the work force. According to the Bureau of Labor statistics, the percent of mothers in

the work force with children under age 18 has increased from 42 percent in 1979, to 56.6 percent in 1980. Projections are that by 1990, 64 percent of all families with children will include a working mother.

Along this same time span and parallel to these changes which have been taking place within the family structure has been a continuing decline in achievement test scores. Much of the blame for this decline has been attributed to both the home and the school. In 1983, the Commission on Excellence in Education stated that a reversal in students' performance can only be accomplished by a cooperative and concerted effort on the part of schools, parents, and the community. If this decline in achievement scores can be even remotely correlated with the absence of a parent in the home or to the temporary absence by a working mother, then these changes within the family structure should provide enough evidence for concern.

The guiding thought upon which the research question and subsequent design was based, focused on the concern for a clearer understanding of the relationship between family structure and children's achievement. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to examine the following research question: There is no significant difference in reading achievement of children in grades 2 through 5 related to family structure.

Review of the Literature

Research studies have offered conflicting evidence on the influences of intact families over single parent families. A study dealing with father absence on child development (Hetherington & Deur, 1972) found that father absence is correlated with a wide range of disturbances in the cognitive and social development of the child. Further, Hetherington and Deur's study indicated that these effects appear to be more pronounced if the father is absent from the home during the child's preschool years. This cognitive and social disturbance can, however, be altered by a loving and stable mother who offers positive reinforcement to the child when he/she exhibits appropriate sex-typed behavior, and by the inclusion of male siblings in the home. Ourth and Zakariya (1982) stated that divorce had a negative effect on children's academic and social performance in the classroom. Studies which have assessed a wide range of variables (e.g., family background, achievement, social class, and sex) have shown that children who were reared with both natural parents exhibited higher achievement scores than those who were not (Touliatos, Lindholm, & Rich, 1978). A recent study by Milne, Myers, Ellman & Ginsberg (1983), utilizing a large nationally representative database of elementary school students (i.e., 242 public schools), found that a correlation existed between the variables: single parent, working mothers, and children's achievement

scores. In addition, this study revealed that a definite, though not direct, correlation existed between the number of parents in the home and the children's overall performance on the achievement tests, however, the predominate factor affecting achievement was the family income.

Contrasting studies have found that family background is not a significant factor in children's achievement and/or behavior. In a study by Atkinson and Ogston (1974) male children from homes in which the father was absent were compared with children from intact homes on academic and extracurricula participation and performance. Results indicated that no difference was found between these variables and family background. A study was done by Hammond (1979) with an equal number of elementary-aged children from divorced and intact families in order to access any differences which might exist between these children on a number of variables: self-concept, academic achievement, behavior and attitude. An analysis of the data indicated that there was no significant difference between the two groups on measures of self-concept or reading achievement. Boys from divorced families rated lower on mathematics, though not significantly, than boys from intact families but little difference was found in mathematics achievement for girls from either divorced or intact families. An overall assessment of the behavioral variable indicated that there was no significant difference between

children from divorced families and intact families on measures of "withdrawal," "peer relations," and "immunity" (as indicated by the Walker Problem Behavior Identification Checklist). However, boys from divorced families did score significanantly higher than boys from intact families on measures of "acting out" and "distractability" (WPBIC).

As indicated from these studies, reports were found to be contradictory and inconclusive with regard to children's family background and certain specified variables. In studies where differences were found, these difference could, however, be attributed to a significant overlapping of certain variables and family background.

Methodology

Sample The sample for this study consisted of 119 boys and girls in grades 2 through 5. Of the sample, 69 children lived in intact families (Group 1) and 50 lived in either single parent or blended families (Group 2). For the purpose of this study, a child who lived with either his/her mother or father was classified as living in a single parent family (Group 2); whereas, a child was described as living in a blended family, whether he/she lived with a stepfather or stepmother (Group 2).

Students were drawn from a school system located in a suburb of a large metropolitan city in Alabama. The socio-economic status of the sample can be classified as

middle to high, due to the few number of students who receive free lunch. Parental permission to participate in the study was obtained for each child.

Instrumentation The instrument used in this study, the Stanford Achievement Test was administered to all the students participating in the study in the Spring, 1985 and the total raw scores for reading achievement were used. All children completed a researcher-developed demographic data sheet.

Results A two-way analysis of variance procedure was used to examine a possible interaction between grade, family structure and the variable, reading score. Results indicate a statistically significant interaction ($F = 3.836$, $df = 3, 111$, $p < .05$). Examination of the mean scores indicate that children in Grade 5 in intact families obtained significantly higher reading scores. These apparent results were confirmed by use of Bonferroni correction formula. The data indicated that fifth graders from intact families obtained significantly higher reading scores than those from other family types (see Tables).

In testing for practical significance for the subjects in Grade 5, the Eta square correlation coefficient was .41, which indicated that not only was the mean score statistically significant, but was practically significant as well.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Discussion

At the beginning of the study it was hypothesized that subjects in grades 2 through 5 would not show any differences in mean reading scores as a result of different family structures. An analysis of the data revealed this hypothesis to be upheld for grades 2 through 4, however, subjects in Grade 5 who were in intact families exhibited higher mean scores in reading achievement than did those from other family types.

Many other factors could play a significantly important part in explaining the difference in reading achievement scores across grade levels other than family type. It is of special importance that the magnitude of these findings be considered when explaining the difference for subjects in Grade 5.

Considering maturity and development, the students in Grade 5 are experiencing pre-adolescent changes of major importance which may have accounted for a marked difference in their school achievement. This could indicate that the younger the subject (i.e., the lower the grade level), the less likely that developmental changes may be a factor in their school achievement.

Subjects in the upper grades are usually presented with more and varied opportunities in which to engage in reading activities across all subject areas. As they engage in this continuous reading they could become frustrated, thus, contributing to lower reading achievement.

A cumulative effect for poor readers could present itself by Grade 5. A low differental between these student's lower reading ability and the norm has, by this grade, become progressively greater over each succeeding year.

Teachers in the upper elementary grades may not be as conscientious in working with individual children in an attempt to improve reading achievement. Consequently, this too may have created a cumulative effect which could manifest itself by the later grade.

A factor from the demographic data revealed that there were more latchkey children from the "other family group" in the upper grades than in the lower grades. Children in self-care are usually given more responsibility for their own learning, and futher that family members are less consistent in encouraging these children to participate in learning tasks which could strengthen their reading ability.

The results of this study indicate that teachers should not assume that children reared in a family structure other than intact families will exhibit a difference in achievement scores. The trend toward lower scores in

Grade 5, as evident from this study, may be attributed to many factors other than the family structure.

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Table 1

Two-Way Analysis of Variance Summary Table Comparing Scores Dependent on Family Structure as Related to Grade

Source	DF	SS	MS	F
Main Effects	4	9029.933	2257.483	7.308
Family Type[ab]	1	1754.930	1754.930	5.681
Grade	3	5977.885	1992.628	6.451
Family X Grade	3	3554.791	1184.930	3.836*
Explained	7	12584.724	1797.818	5.820
Residual	111	34286.856	308.891	
Total	118	46871.580	397.217	

Note. *$p < .05$.
[a]Family Type - Intact family
[b]Family Type - Single parent or blended families (other)

Table 2

t Test Summary Table for Family Type and Grade Level

Grade		n	X	SD	t
2	Group 1[a]	23	103.0435	14.705	.02
	Group 2[b]	10	102.9000	17.904	
3	Group 1[a]	19	93.0526	14.543	1.13
	Group 2[b]	14	86.2857	18.503	
4	Group 1[a]	15	84.9333	23.249	-.23
	Group 2[b]	12	86.6667	16.533	
5	Group 1[a]	12	97.6667	14.035	4.01*
	Group 2[b]	14	70.0714	20.842	

Note. *$p < .05$
[a]Group 1 Intact family
[b]Group 2 Single parent or blended families (other)